



Chinese Names: Challenges for Chinese Diaspora

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Chinese names – a few basics

- Surnames usually are one syllable or character, but can be two
- Surnames precede the given name
- Given names can be one or two syllables or characters, but usually two
- Two syllable given names often include a generation name, shared across siblings and cousins of that generation.

Complications may arise for overseas Chinese when researching names

- Upon immigration, names were alphabetized or Romanized. Spellings of names may vary for a number of reasons:
 - Differing Romanization systems
 - Names could be spelled with no regard to a Romanized system, phonetically as the recorder heard it.
 - Spellings of names can differ depending upon the dialect or language of country from where the person immigrated.
- Some names were Westernized after immigration
 - Some Chinese given names became surnames
 - Some changed name order, placing the surname at the end of the name
 - Some added Western given names
- Paper names – some Chinese assumed a different identity to overcome the restrictions of the U.S. Chinese Exclusion Act Laws, becoming “paper sons”.

Suggestions when conducting records searches for Chinese immigrants

- Do not become restricted to one name spelling. Look for spelling variations among search results. Search using varied spellings in the name fields.
- Try to search reversing name order, sometimes putting the surname in the given name field and vice versa.
- Corroborate records using other information – names of parents, spouses, addresses, etc.

- When searching for Chinese genealogies (jiapu), knowing the true surname is key. If only a paper name is known or a name in Romanized spelling, one needs to discover the Chinese character. They must ask family members. Another resource may be the gravestones of ancestors, if inscribed in Chinese characters.
- Learning the various lifetime names of ancestors is also useful in identifying ancestors in their jiapu. Again, family members may know this information.

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